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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the growth, decline, and termination of the State University of New York Biomedical Communication Network (SUNY/BCN). It is noted that SUNY/BCN became operational in 1968 with nine medical library members and provided the first online access to the Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System (MEDLARS) of the National Library of Medicine (NLM). The paper examines the early history of SUNY/BCN from 1968 to 1973 and its later years, from 1974 to 1977, when the network stopped functioning and Bibliographic Retrieval Services (BRS) began providing service to former users. It is suggested that the system ended because it lacked a clear definition of scope, because its governance was not well defined, because users were not given high priority time on the computer, and because users doubted SUNY Central Administration's long-term commitment to the continuance of SUNY/BCN. (Author/ESR)

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A STUDY OF THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK BIOMEDICAL COMMUNICATION NETWORK (SUNY/BCN) FROM 1968 to 1977

by

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The development of the online bibliographic retrieval network, defined as an arrangement between three or more libraries to provide access to a computer for online searching of bibliographic data bases, has occurred relatively recently. In 1968, the State University of New York Biomedical Communication Network (SUNY/BCN) began operation as the first online bibliographic retrieval network, providing online searching capability of the National Library of Medicine's (NLM) Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System (MEDLARS) data base. Previously MEDLARS had been searchable only offline in a batch mode.

SUNY/BCN was a pioneer in the area of networking, for example, programming and testing as early as 1969 an online interlibrary loan transmission system which was not implemented because it was thought it would too greatly tax the system.

SUNY/BCN enjoyed growth and success in its first few years, as described in Janet Egeland's article, "the SUNY Biomedical Communication Network: six years of progress in on-line bibliographic retrieval." (1) However, beginning in 1972, when the Network expanded its membership scope to include a non-medical library and added other data bases, SUNY/BCN began to experience various administrative conflicts over its purpose and function. Basically, the appropriateness of a state institution offering online access to a variety of data bases to a variety of users throughout the United States was questioned by SUNY administration. Users of the Network, that is, the member libraries, dissatisfied with unimproved service and concerned about what they perceived as a lack of administrative support, formed an independent organization and eventually contracted for services with a private vendor, BRS. SUNY/BCN stopped functioning in 1977.

Its "end"is studied under the assumption that we may learn from history; that by studying the conflicts and difficulties which SUNY/BCN encountered and which led to its end, system planners and administrators may be better informed and able to circumvent or solve similar problems in the design and execution of present and future networks.

1968 - 1973: PERIOD OF GROWTH

SUNY/BCN began in the fall of 1965 as an idea of a committee of medical librarians, medical faculty members and administrators from the three SUNY Medical Centers at Buffalo, Syracuse (Upstate Medical Center), and Brooklyn (Downstate Medical Center). The purpose, as stated by one of its primary founders and the first director, Irwin Pizer, was "to link the medical schools through an online, real-time computer system that will enable them to serve the user populations of their schools and their regions with more and better services." (2) The report on the possibility of making online access to the MEDLARS data base was first accepted by the SUNY INTRACOM Committee in January 1966. With significant financial support from SUNY, work began on the system in cooperation with NLM.(3)

The data files of the computer were to contain the book catalog records of the three medical libraries of items published from 1962 onwards, called NETBOOK, merged with the NLM book catalog records from 1966 onwards, called NLMBook. This part of the file was to be a pilot project for the entire SUNY system and was to include in-depth indexing of monographs to determine its feasibility for other disciplines. The files also contained the NLM's MEDLARS tapes (five years online and the rest offline), the records of the Union List of Serials for SUNY, and the circulation records for the Upstate Medical Center Library.(4)

The system became operational in October 1968 with nine libraries. In addition to the original SUNY medical libraries at Buffalo, Upstate and Downstate Medical Centers, the members included the SUNY Medical Library at Stony Brook, the Edward G. Miner Library at the University of Rochester, Albany Medical College (AMC), the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine at Harvard, the Parkinson's Disease Information Center at Columbia, and the NLM. The Network was headquartered in Syracuse with a staff of twenty-five, and had the use of a "dedicated" computer, an IBM 360/40, installed in 1967 (that is, the computer was used exclusively by SUNY/BCN.)(5)

Another purpose of the Network , besides providing fast bibliographic information

was to provide health professionals with the means to perform their own online searches. A "Query" language was developed for this purpose but eventually was discontinued as it was not widely used by patrons.(6)

SUNY/BCN was unique in that it sought user input in making policy. To quote Janet Egeland, a later director of the SUNY/BCN:

> One of the unique and most important aspects of the SUNY/BCN is that all the major network policy has ... been determined by Advisory Councils of Network members themselves. In 1968, the Network Advisory Council was composed of the directors of the original nine medical libraries. (As of 1973), the Advisory Council is now called the User's Task Force Committee and it consists of eleven elected representatives from the 32 member institutions. This group meets semiannually and is responsible for all major policy decisions affecting the operation and the future of the SUNY Network.(7)

A special Subcommittee on the Network Operations was formed by the User's Task Force Committee in 1971 to "serve as a liaison between the Computer Center Staff and the Network users and to make recommendations to the larger group regarding necessary changes or modifications in system operations." Egeland felt that the user groups were an integral part of the Network's success.

In 1970, Irwin Pizer left SUNY Upstate Medical Center and resigned as Director of the Network. Due to this and other factors, SUNY/BCN users became concerned the Network might lose its previously strong administrative support at Syracuse, and be discontinued. A high-level SUNY administrator called a meeting of the system members, personnel, and SUNY administrators to demonstrate the value of the Network. A physician from AMC testified to the value of SUNY/BCN to the medical community. SUNY Administration was convinced of the usefulness of the system, and the Network was moved to the SUNY Central Office Computer Center in Albany, New York, under the direction of Ronald Quake.(8) Moving "enabled SUNY to maintain its service at a lower cost to the user than would have been possible had operation continued at Syracuse on the smaller, dedicated computer system." (9)

Once in Albany, SUNY/BCN was one of many competitors for use of the SUNY Central computer; it was no longer the sole user of a dedicated computer. A major competitor

for space and priority computer time was SUNY Central Administration itself whose needs included, for example, the record of the entire student registration for the SUNY system. Users began to complain about decreased response time of the system, as noted in an 1971 Work Session of the SUNY/BCN which met to compare different medical centers' use of SUNY/BCN. Requests by the users for improved service were met with the reply that Administration was unable to grant such requests at that time because of shortages in staff and funds.(10)

The scope of the Network also changed with the SUNY at Albany Library joining in 1972 -- it was the first non-medical library to do so. The library began to push for access to data bases other than MEDLARS and put up the initial money to get the ERIC data base online. The MEDLARS data base had been so successful in its implementation, that the library wanted to add to the choices of data bases. As the first step in adding data bases, the Network discontinued the IBM Document Processing program and implemented IBM STAIRS software program.(11)

By the end of 1973, the period of rapid growth in membership was over and SUNY/BCN began to face some difficult issues.

1973 - 1977: DECLINE AND END OF OPERATION

The year 1973 saw several personnel changes including the resignation of Ronald Quake from his dual position as Director of the SUNY Central Office Computer Center and as Director of SUNY/BCN in mid-1973. An Acting Director of the Computer Center was named and Janet Egeland was given responsibility for the interim direction of the SUNY/BCN in Quake's place. Quake was to enter into the picture again in 1976; more will be written on that later.

It appeared to some of the users that SUNY/BCN was once again without the strong administrative support of SUNY Central. Despite these changes, the Network continued to grow; ERIC became available online in October 1973, PSYCHOLOGICAL ABSTRACTS in March 1974, and three new members joined in 1973.(12)

Yet another physical move for the SUNY Central computer occurred in May 1974

when the SUNY Central Office Computer Center moved to the Twin Towers Building in Albany to be in the same physical location as the rest of the SUNY Central Administrative Staff.(13)

In November 1974, SUNY/BCN began charging for offline printing to make up some of its costs.(14)

Perhaps the move, plus the growing financial problems New York state was having added to the conflict among SUNY administrators whether or not to continue service, or at least whether or not to be responsive to user requests. The state budget for the 1976-1977 fiscal year was to be frozen at the 1975-1976 level, so that the costs of new programs and the enrichment of existing ones were to be absorbed within the current levels of finances.(15) The tightening state budget was felt by some members of SUNY/BCN to have played a key role in the Network's losing further support with the SUNY Administration.(16)

Requests for improved service were unmet by the Computer Center Administration. The notes from the SUNY/BCN Subcommittee on Network Operations, which met February 10-11, 1975, reported that a "large number of questions and suggestions from users," such as adding evening searching hours and adding the SOCIOLOGICAL ABSTRACTS data base, were rejected by the Computer Center "due to various reasons such as limitations in hardware, (in)programming, and (in the) computer center of system capabilities."(17)

In January of 1976, the thirty-six members of the system began to take action to remedy what they saw as SUNY's lack of responsiveness to their needs by forming a Biomedical Communication Network (BCN), separate and in no way affiliated with SUNY/BCN, as it was to be a nonprofit association of users. Irwin Pizer, who was the first Chairman of the Board of Directors of the BCN, was instrumental in its inception, and in the continuation of online services to its members by a new vendor, BRS. The BCN hoped to impress their concerns upon the adminstration more forcefully as an independent group, and to be able, if necessary, to contract with a vendor of services to meet their specifications for a computer system.(18,19) As just mentioned, the later action was eventually taken.

At the January meeting of SUNY/BCN User's Task Force Committee, the Network's Policy Committee as part of SUNY Administration revealed that it was debating whether or not SUNY could continue the Network at the same level of service for another six months to a year. A price increase of $1000 per member was planned for April 1976, while no improvement of services and no updating of data bases were planned. SUNY Administration was also debating the issue of the appropriateness of SUNY's operating a national network. It became obvious to Network users that SUNY/BCN lacked strong administrative support.(20,21)

Bylaws for the BCN, a constitution spelling out the reasons for its formation and its purpose, and a list of computer system specifications were drawn up. The group was incorporated in February 1976. At that time, 23 of the SUNY/BCN members had joined, two had declined membership -- the New York State Library in Albany, and SUNY at Buffalo -- and nine were considering membership.(22)

In response to what was perceived as the possible end of the Network, the newly formed BCN began negotiations with a group of computer experts for possible future services; this was the beginning of Bibliographic Retrieval Services (BRS). A proposal was submitted by Finserv Computer Corporation to the Board of Directors of the BCN on April 12, 1976. It was presented by Creighton Brittell, head of Finserv, and Ronald Quake, who was acting as a consultant to Finserv. At that time, they stated that if their expenses for setting up were met, they could be ready for service in 5 months. At this same meeting, Janet Egeland's resignation as Director of the SUNY Network was announced. Mr. Brittell stated that if Finserv were selected the vendor, Mrs. Egeland would join the company with responsibility for marketing and training.(23)

By October 1976, all the non-SUNY members of SUNY/BCN had signed contracts with the new vendor, BRS, for service to begin January 1977. In cooperation, SUNY gave six month contracts to all its subscribers, asking for 90 days termination notice, thereby making the transition to BRS a smooth one for users. At this time, SUNY still had made no committment to operate SUNY/BCN beyond March 31, 1977, or to improve or maintain its levels of service.(24)

BRS began service on January 3, 1977. With so few subscribers, SUNY/BCN stopped functioning by May 1977. The remaining subscribers transferred their subscriptions to BRS when the Network stopped functioning.(25)

CONCLUSIONS

One of the factors contributing to the end of the SUNY/BCN was undoubtedly the lack of definition of the precise purpose of the Network. Initially, it began as a network to serve medical libraries within the SUNY system. The mission was later expanded to provide services to medical libraries outside SUNY, and further expanded to include non-medical, university libraries. Originally planned as a network for New York state, the network grew to include libraries as far west as Minnesota. Obviously, the purpose and scope were no longer clearly defined when, in 1975, SUNY Administration expressed doubt about the appropriateness of SUNY/BCN, a state-owned organization, as a national network.

The governance of SUNY/BCN was also not clearly defined. Initially, the User's Task Force Committee was responsible for all major policy decisions, yet appeared to gradually lose its authority to make such decisions regarding improved services. Evidently acting under economic pressures, SUNY Central Administration vetoed requests for improved services as being too costly more frequently in the later years of the Network, effectively taking away the User's Task Force Committee's authority.

Network members had to contend with decreasing response time at continued levels of cost, as the priority given to Network use of the computer was relatively low. Users doubted SUNY Central Administration's financial support of SUNY/BCN in late 1975 and early 1976 when SUNY was unwilling to make a committment to contine the Network. Users decided they had few options other than to seek alternative service, which they did with BRS. A quote from Irwin Pizer perhaps sums up best the feeling among users:

> The lesson to be learned will not be forgotten... Without subscribers, an on-line service cannot survive, and unless the services meet the needs of these subscribers in all respects and unless there is a measure of confidence in the service, a vendor, whether commercial or

non-profit, cannot succeed.(26)

SUNY/BCN broke new ground as the first online bibliographic network and made many valuable contributions to the knowledge of online networks through such projects as the "Query" user interface language. Its eventual end demonstrates the necessity for good system design for bibliographic networks at all stages of growth, including the consideration of expressed users' needs, clear definition of and adherence to scope of mission, and committment to continued funding over time. Further study of the factors necessary in the successful design and management of online bibliographic networks by examining existing systems and those which have stopped functioning would be helpful to facilitate planning for systems in the future.

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